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PLAGIARISM

QUITE A RATHER BAD LITTLE CRIME

by Edith Skom

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For ever since I started teaching, I have been interested in plagiarism, interested enough, finally, to write a mystery that revolves around it. In the meantime, I made some random observations about plagiarism, and about some of the paradoxes associated with it.

I looked up *plagiarism* and *plagiarize* in Roget, and found them under *theft*. Keeping lexicographic company with plagiarism and plagiarize, I found such verbs and nouns as filch, pinch, sack, pillage, plunder, sneak, bushwhacking, shanghaing, heave, spoil, loot, swag. Under the heading *thief*, appears *plagiarist*. Interconnected with plagiarists are chicken thieves, bandits, larcenists, poachers, grave robbers, cattle rustlers, embezzlers, highjackers, kidnappers, abductors.

Roget's line up seems to convey exactly our attitude toward plagiarism. Clearly we see it as a crime. And clearly it is a crime that fascinates us.

The paradox. Plagiarism affects us in ways that other "worse" crimes do not. I am more interested in reading about plagiarism than about crimes that are seen as more vile or despicable. With far more interest than when I read about the most recent Mafia body in a trunk, I read every detail of every report about plagiarism. I'm fascinated to find that Paula Wolfert, a New York food writer, says that 165 recipes she published in *Gourmet* magazine were included without attribution in Lady Pamela Harlech's cookbook, *Feast Without Fuss*. I'm just as fascinated to learn that Arthur Baker, a calligrapher, is suing jewelry designer Paloma Picasso for "design piracy," charging that Picasso's "Gold Fish" line of 18-karat gold pins was taken line for line from designs in Baker's book, *New Calligraphic Ornaments and Flourishes*.

But I react with most interest when the plagiarism involves writing. Why the special interest in writing? Because I value the written word. Because I revere the printed page. And because I'm impressed when *anyone* gets published.

When it turns out that someone who has impressed me has plagiarized, I feel a change in my estimate of that person. What I had admired was not there to admire. She or he is not so creative after all.

At a symposium on plagiarism in England, the philosopher J. O. Urmson called plagiarism a crime of "misrepresentation . . . a contemptible act of imposture, of unjustifiable self-inflation." I'm horrified when I learn a writer has plagiarized, because the discovery turns the writer into less of a person: he becomes a charlatan who does not have the ability I endowed him with.

Urmson says that plagiarism is "totally unlike the theft of a can of beans." I agree. My reaction to plagiarism is completely different from what I would feel if the same person were caught shoplifting. Shoplifting would make me think there is some aberration in the writer's character, but it wouldn't—as plagiarism does—change my estimate of his intellectual endowments.

The discovery of plagiarism not only lowers my estimate of the writer's abilities, it puts a permanent stain on everything he has written. Raymond Sokolov writes that: "plagiarism, even the suspicion of plagiarism . . . is a taint an author wants at all costs to avoid, because it undermines the authenticity of author-

ship itself." In the same way, whenever someone is singled out as a plagiarist, everything the person wrote before or since is called into question. Fair or unfair, whether the accusation has been proven or not, whenever that person's name comes up, I think *plagiarist*, and I don't place as much value on his writing.

And the stigma remains. Though I can't remember the name of the chief culprit in the Continental Bank scandal—the rascal who committed a crime with a far more calamitous effect than plagiarism—I remember the names of the plagiar-

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ists, and the alleged plagiarists: Gail Sheehey . . . Alex Haley . . . Jerzy Kosinski . . . Penelope Gilliatt . . . John Lardner . . . D. M. Thomas.

I see the name. I think—*plagiarist*.

PARADOXES

I'm just as likely to notice and remember when the plagiarism appears closer to home.

The paradox: Northwestern is a first-rate university. We have students with high SATs. We have high school salutatorians and valedictorians. Yet, there is a surprising amount of plagiarism.

Now that I'm teaching writing, I run into plagiarism less often—I flatter myself that my assignments are cleverly designed to prevent it. But when I taught literature courses, I ran into plagiarism regularly. Indeed, I ran into Lionel Trilling so often that I was tempted to write to congratulate him. I'm sorry, now that he's dead, that I never did.

That plagiarism is still rampant at Northwestern is obvious to all of us, not just from what we find in our classes or hear by word of mouth, but from what we read in the *Daily Northwestern*—such as the recent headline "Copy Cat Blues, NU Tough on Plagiarism."

The existence of plagiarism is obvious, too, from the existence of Northwestern's special handout on plagiarism—derived from a Dartmouth publication—and from semi-official letters we receive warning us not to tempt students into academic dishonesty and advising us to discuss plagiarism early in the quarter. We're warned not to leave graded papers out in the open in the office, because papers with high grades have been stolen and copied—what's suggested is not only that there is more plagiarism, but that the plagiarists are becoming more sophisticated. Their ingenuity and arrogance, it seems, know no bounds. Any day now I expect to hear of a student who has complained: "What do you mean giving me a *B* on this paper? This is an old family term paper—it got my uncle an *A* at Rutgers."

What's suggested is not only that there is more plagiarism, but that plagiarists are becoming more sophisticated. Their ingenuity and arrogance know no bounds.

The existence of so much plagiarism brings out another paradox: Though the crime abounds, the "criminals" are not always genuine criminals. Some are just naive.

A significant number of plagiarists genuinely don't understand that they are plagiarizing. It's less that these students don't understand the niceties of acknowledging material, than that they do not understand the basics of footnoting. The most extreme example of this for me was a student who headed up his paper with the note—"This paper is from authors"—and then went on with thirty or so pages of quoted material, but no footnotes at all.

More common is the student who does not understand that you must footnote even when you paraphrase. Recently I had a student who wrote a paper that relied heavily on a January 1985 *Atlantic* article, "The Awful Privacy of Baby Doe" by Nat Hentoff. In the article, Hentoff quotes a woman who wrote to him:

> As a social studies teacher of ancient civilizations, I conducted classroom discussions covering the topic 'Ideals of Sparta vs. Ideas of Athens.' It was always . . . a shock for my students to learn that the Spartans, who valued 'body' over 'mind,' could be as callous and cruel as to leave their deformed newborns on the rocky hillsides to die. . ."

A significant number of plagiarists genuinely don't understand that they are plagiarizing . . . they do not understand the basics of footnoting . . . [or] that you must footnote even when you paraphrase.

The following is from my student's paper:

> It may seem that these doctors have historical ancestors. The Spartans, who valued body over mind, were callous and cruel enough to leave their deformed babies on the rocky hillsides to die.

The student changed a few words—"as callous and cruel" to "callous and cruel enough," "newborns" to "babies"—and then omitted both quotation marks and a footnote. Yet elsewhere in his paper he did cite Hentoff's article. In talking with him, it became clear that he did not understand the mechanics of quoting and footnoting.

In contrast, another student, from some years ago, wrote a paper on "Fate, As It Affects the Plot of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*," a paper, as I later found out, that relies heavily on *Fatalism in the Works of Thomas Hardy* by Albert Pettigrew Elliott. I'll give just one of many examples. This is from Elliott's book:

> In *Tess* . . . There are many Fateful Incidents—Durbeyfield's learning of his lineage, the killing of the old horse, the child resulting from the seduction, the series of events which frustrates Tess's attempt to confess to Angel, culminating in the letter under the carpet, the death of her father, which plays into Alec's hands again, and the return of Angel just too late. . .

This is from the student's paper:

> Many examples of the fateful incident may be found in *Tess*: Tess's misfortune to be born first into a shiftless family; Durbeyfield's learning of his lineage; the death of the horse; the events which frustrate Tess's attempt to confess to Angel, ending in her letter slipping beneath the carpet; the death of her father, and the return of Angel just a little to late.

One could argue that the second student was as naive as the first. She, too, changes a few words. And she adds an "incident" of her own—Tess's misfortune to be born into a shiftless family—which seems to me more than incidental. Perhaps she, too, omits quotation

marks and a footnote because she doesn't understand the mechanics.

The difference, however, is that the second paper, unlike the first, fails to give any citations of the major source. And, unlike the first, the second paper is made up entirely of paraphrases and quotations from the major source. Yet Elliott is not even mentioned in the bibliography. Indeed, the student, when I talked with her, said she had never seen the book by Elliott.

PROOF AND PUNISHMENT

It is papers like the second that lead to the next paradox: The burden of plagiarism falls less (maybe never) on the criminal than on the one who has to follow through on the crime.

Discussions of plagiarism tend to overlook this problem. They concentrate on such questions as, What is plagiarism? Why does someone plagiarize? What should the punishment be?

Such discussions, based on the assumption that the plagiarist's source has been identified, may lead those who have not been in the fast lane with plagiarism to assume it is easy to find the source. But, finding the source is not always so simple. And without evidence, there can be no finding anyone guilty of plagiarism.

Identifying a piece of writing as plagiarism may, itself, be easy. When a student who has been writing like a robot—"*Little Dorrit* is a book by Charles Dickens. It is a book which contains valuable lessons"—suddenly writes—"We may say of Dickens that at the time of *Little Dorrit* he was at a crisis of the will," or "Gowan associates himself with Blandois in order to *épater* society," or "The fog of *Bleak House*, the dust heap and the river of *Our Mutual Friend* scarcely equal in force the prison image which dominates *Little Dorrit*"—the plagiarism is obvious.

The burden of plagiarism falls less (maybe never) on the criminal than on the one who has to follow through on the crime.

We all know the obvious places to begin looking for the source: the introduction of the text you're reading in class . . . *Twentieth Century Views* . . . Cliff Notes . . . Lionel Trilling.

Even if we do not recognize Trilling immediately, the plagiarist has betrayed himself not only by the sudden exhibition of remarkable polish and depth, but also through such obvious giveaways as the French idiom and the sophisticated allusions. We all know the signals.

And we all know the obvious places to begin looking for the source: the introduction of the text you're reading in class . . . *Twentieth Century Views* . . . Cliff Notes . . . Lionel Trilling.

But even looking in the obvious places takes time. And if they do not produce pay dirt, then we are in for spending much more time. Certainly, I have spent more time than I like to remember—in the stacks looking through the literature on Hardy, in seedy corners of bookstores looking through Cliff Notes, talking to colleagues, making phone calls. I once—in a case that remains unsolved—called *Playboy's* information service in my effort to track down a source.

When I do succeed in tracking down a source, I admit to a feeling of triumph, and Hercule Poirot satisfaction, so that I almost see myself in a scene out of Agatha Christie:

Certainement, Hastings. If my plagiarist had not made one small mistake, he would have run no risk."

"And his mistake?"

"*Mon ami*, he overlooked the little gray cells of E. Skom."

I have noticed another paradox, this one in our reactions to plagiarism: Though we are sure plagiarism is a crime, our punishment varies all the way from "I don't have the time to track it down" so there is no punishment at all, to turning the student in to the Dean.

I can only guess at the reasons for the varying responses. I wonder, however, if they relate to how a student reacts when you confront him, or how you confront the student.

A friend of mine—I'll call her Anna—liked a dramatic Perry Mason approach. Anna told me how she confronted one plagiarist: Calling the student aside after class, she made an appointment for him to see her in her office. He was nervous at first, no doubt because he thought she had found him out. But when she urged him to take a seat, pointed to his paper on her desk and said, "That was a good paper you wrote," he relaxed and looked pleased.

"Oh you think it's good?"

"Very good," she said. "An excellent paper. Profound ideas."

"Thanks," he said modestly and sat back in his chair, very much at ease now.

Then, quick as a flash, Anna pulled the desk drawer open, whipped out the book he had plagiarized from, and thrust it into his face. "Did you get any of your ideas from *this*?" she asked, and the student all but collapsed.

Anna's approach seems to me the equivalent of giving the plagiarist a stress test. A gentle approach is more my style. I'm aggressive in tracking down plagiarism, but when it comes to confronting a student, I'm tentative, embarrassed—as if *I* had plagiarized.

I'm thinking in particular about a foreign student who seemed to have difficulties with the language and rarely talked in class. I wasn't sure if he was shy or if he was having trouble understanding the novels we were reading. But when he handed in his first paper, I decided he was shy, because the paper—though it had some gaps—was excellent.

We talked about his paper and I told him, "Richard, your ideas are excellent, but I'm not sure what main idea you're getting at. And especially I'm having trouble seeing the connections between ideas."

Richard made clear it would be no trouble to supply the connecting thoughts I wanted. He then handed in a revision that included the connecting thoughts—in such sentences as "Gowan associates himself with Blandois in order to *épater* society" and "The fog of *Bleak House*, the dust heap and the river of *Our Mutual Friend* scarcely equal in force the prison image which dominates *Little Dorrit*."

When I gently confronted Richard with the plagiarism, his response reminded me of the response of the draftee Thurber describes in *My Life and Hard Times*.

The draftee, before his physical, had taken the precaution of swallowing a watch to make the doctors believe there was something wrong with him. The doctor put the stethoscope to the man's stomach, heard ticking, and said, "You have swallowed a watch, my man." The draftee got red in the face and said, "On *purpose*?" "That I can't say," the doctor answered.

Richard admitted to the plagiarism. We talked about it. He was very ashamed. And I gave him the opportunity to write another paper.

On the other hand, the student who plagiarized the paper on Hardy reacted entirely differently: "Me plagiarize? I didn't do it. I'm in shock."

Though we are sure plagiarism is a crime, our punishment varies all the way from . . . no punishment at all, to turning the student in to the Dean.

A writer . . . is rewarded for his "skill in finding, discriminating among, and organizing in his own way the thoughts of others."

The denial made me angry, and I reacted accordingly. I didn't turn her in, but I didn't give her the chance to write another paper and gave her an *F* on the first. So I, too, represent the paradox of vacillating reactions to plagiarism.

PRINCIPLES VS. PRACTICE

Not only is there a paradox in our varying reactions to student plagiarism, there is, I think, another paradox in how we define plagiarism for ourselves. Though academia comes out as strongly anti-plagiarism, it does not always follow through on the principles it advocates.

Northwestern's handout on plagiarism brings out the two major reasons for citing sources: to give the credit that is due the writer whose ideas are used; and to let the reader who wants to take the subject further know where to go. As the handout puts it—"Mutual aid is one of the great traditions of higher learning and no opportunity to provide it should be neglected."

These are admirable and logical principles. I wonder, however, if they are always practiced.

Some fine scholarly books, for example, are way too skimpy with footnotes: A writer may cite references only when he quotes and give no citations at all when he paraphrases. Carolyn Heilbrun makes a similar complaint in her review of *Virginia Woolf* by Lyndall Gordon. Heilbrun writes that "the most glaring defect [in Gordon's book] is the notes, which seem to have been designed, like the cancer warning on cigarette packages, to be disdained. References are virtually impossible to find, since they are not numbered, nor is there a list of works cited: to track down a source requires the skill and fortitude of a private eye. Mrs. Gordon is far too fine a scholar to have permitted or encouraged such shameful documentation."

I noted something of the same kind when I was writing my dissertation and read John Gross's fine book, *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters*. There were many passages that I wanted to follow up on, but I had to guess what book or books to read, because Gross includes no footnotes, only a bibliography for each chapter.

I am not accusing these writers of plagiarism, but certainly they have failed to give the touted "mutual aid" we expect our students to give: the exact source of facts, judgments, and opinions from another writer.

The complete acknowledgement I am asking for may also be overlooked in the classroom. I have heard many disillusioned students complain after discovering that a professor whose lectures she or he had admired had taken the lectures entirely from someone else's book—without acknowledgment.

This brings me to the question: What can we do to discourage plagiarism? And, in trying to answer this question, I wonder if perhaps we can do more than simply explain what plagiarism is, and explain when and why footnotes are required.

I am thinking now about the student who told me she had taken to using the dictionary—because she had seen *me* use it so often. I am speculating that if *we* are more scrupulous about acknowledging our sources—even verbal sources—in our handouts and in our lectures, then our actions may say more to our students than all the Dartmouth handouts on plagiarism and all the class exercises we devise.

If we hesitate about acknowledging so thoroughly, perhaps we need to think through our reasons for not wanting to acknowledge. I point out the handout passage that explains that the exact source must be given wherever they have used "specific facts, explanations, judgments, opinions, or hypotheses" from another writer. Some students

respond with a dismal "But my whole *paper* will be footnotes"—as if the many footnotes would nullify the value of the paper.

The handout anticipates this objection, and counters it. A writer, says the handout, is rewarded for his "skill in finding, discriminating among, and organizing in his own way the thoughts of others," and a writer's "effectiveness in preparing a lucid and forceful combination of materials taken from the writing of others is quite as much a part of his achievement as any other portion of his work." Again, I wonder, do we believe in these principles?

I wonder, too, if the varying interpretation of when and what to acknowledge indicates another paradox: Though we seem to be certain about the definition of plagiarism, our actions may reflect uncertainty and confusion.

There are areas of confusion. One I have heard is, Should I expect a student to give credit when giving an oral report? Another I have thought of myself is, Should I footnote outside sources in a novel?

After thinking it through, it seems to me that, in both cases, the answer ought to be, yes. A student should give credit in an oral report for the same reasons a professor should give credit in a lecture: to give credit where credit is due and to aid those who want to do further research.

And I should acknowledge outside sources in my novel for the same reasons I would if I were writing nonfiction. The method may be somewhat different from the usual footnote, but I should acknowledge, nevertheless. As Raymond Sokolov said of D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*: ". . . it would have been a simple matter to identify the quotations [he used] as such, rather than inserting them without quotation marks or even an explanatory note . . . He simply ought to have let us all know exactly what he was doing, as T.S. Eliot did, when he footnoted and marked shorter citations from earlier writers which he inserted into the text of 'The Waste Land.'"

What strikes me about this passage is his outspokenness in asking Thomas to acknowledge his use of another writer. Sokolov, of course, is sure of his ground. But I think also that he feels free to be so candid because he does not know D.M. Thomas—and because he is not asking Thomas to acknowledge Sokolov's own ideas.

A student should give credit in an oral report for the same reasons a professor should give credit in a lecture: to give credit where credit is due . . .

It may not be so easy to be direct when you ask someone you know to acknowledge use of your own ideas. It seems to me that you are put in a position similar to the one you are in when you have to ask a friend for money he borrowed from you. There is something shameful about asking—a "wrong" kind of greed is suggested.

In the same way, you feel there is something vaguely humiliating, or embarrassing, about asking a colleague to acknowledge you when he has used an idea of yours. But, as we indicate to our students, there is nothing wrong with expecting such acknowledgement.

If I still hesitate about acknowledging, I need to think about how I feel when someone expresses an idea of mine without acknowledging me. I don't like it. I resent it when even one weak witticism of mine is passed off without proper credit.

By the same token, I would like to avoid becoming part of *Roget*'s criminal line-up by being guilty of plagiarism myself. I want neither to be included among *Roget*'s chicken thieves—nor his abductors. By the way, Sokolov points out that the word *plagiarism* "comes from a Roman legal term signifying abduction of another person's child or slave."[20]

I would, therefore, like to end by giving credit to everyone who helped me with this talk. My list of acknowledgments follows.

I must say that when I finished compiling them, the amount of my indebtedness surprised me.

My thanks to all my sources. ■

Acknowledgments

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